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SUBJECT: BIOTECH CROPPING UP AGAIN IN THAILAND

REF: 05 Bangkok 7336

¶1. Summary. The Thai Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (MOAC) is building Cabinet support for the lifting of a six-year long moratorium on biotech crop field trials. Field trials were halted in 2001 when public and political opinion called for more stringent regulations for biotech crops due to heightened fears of health and environmental impacts. A Cabinet vote to resume field trials could come as early as next week. Recent efforts by FAS Bangkok and pro-biotech organizations in Thailand have helped increase public awareness of the advantages of biotech crops and dispel myths. During this most recent effort, public opposition has been lighter than expected. End Summary.

¶2. According to Dr. Suthat Sriwatanapongse of the Biotechnology Alliance Association (a non-government organization dedicated to the promotion of biotechnology in Thailand), the Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives, the Minister of Science and Technology, the Minister of Public Health and the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment have been working to build support among other members of the Cabinet to lift the moratorium on open field trials of biotech crops. Dr. Suthat and others connected to the biotech industry in Thailand are optimistic that the Cabinet will vote on the Ministry's proposal as early as next week.

Resistance to Biotech Crops

¶3. Numerous groups have raised concerns over development of biotech food in Thailand. Biothai, a local NGO, has expressed fears biotech crops will migrate from research fields to ordinary fields and "contaminate" traditional crops. Biothai is opposed to the lifting of the moratorium without a legal structure holding biotech firms accountable for damage to non-biotech farmers and the environment. Another concern is that the planting of biotech crops will taint the image of Thailand's agricultural sector and affect its substantial agricultural exports, particularly to Europe and Japan.

¶4. On August 16, the Bangkok Post reported that Witoon Lienchamroon, director of Biothai, threatened the Thai government with legal action if it failed to enact a new National Bio-Safety Law before allowing open field trials of biotech crops. This is the first public NGO response to the recent push for the lifting of the moratorium.

Biotech Developments in Thailand

¶5. Agriculture contributes approximately 10 percent to Thailand's GDP. Thailand is a world leader in the production of rice, cassava, canned tuna and canned pineapple. Currently, 49 percent of the labor force is engaged in some form of agriculture. The Royal Thai Government (RTG) has traditionally supported the belief that Thailand will need to embrace biotechnology in order to maintain a competitive advantage in agricultural production in the region.

¶16. In 1983, the RTG established the National Center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (BIOTEC) under the Ministry of Science and Energy. In 1991, BIOTEC was placed under the newly established National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA). Since then, BIOTEC has facilitated the drafting of biosafety regulatory schemes and the National Policy on Biotechnology and its Strategy for Implementation 2004-2009. The establishment of BIOTEC and its continued support is indicative of the RTG's commitment to biotechnology.

¶17. Since the establishment of BIOTEC, there have been several advancements in the development of biotech crops in Thailand. Thai researchers initiated field trials of biotech tomato, papaya, cotton and chili peppers starting in 1994. There were hopes of researching and developing such high value crops as rice, sugar cane and rubber. However, field trials were halted in 2001 after increased pressure from NGOs and activist groups. Greenpeace and BioThai were the most vocal and their effective use of the Thai media resulted in a negative public perception of biotechnology. The Cabinet imposed a moratorium on biotech field trials, which was reaffirmed by the Cabinet under Prime Minister Thaksin in 2004. In 2001, the MOAC (now under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Resources and Environment), tasked the National Drafting Committee (NDC) with drafting a National Biotech-safety Law.

¶18. The public's concern about biotechnology resurfaced in 2004, when several biotech papaya plants were found in a local farmer's field in Khon Kaen Province. Greenpeace then facilitated the destruction of all the biotech plants at the MOAC extension office in Khon Kaen, further generating negative publicity for biotech foods.

USG Takes on Papaya

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¶19. Embassy Bangkok has concentrated its efforts on improving the image of biotech foods by focusing on one crop, papaya, and the papaya ring spot virus (PRSV) that has crippled Thai production. PRSV destroys the leaves of papaya trees and leads to a decrease in fruit size and yield. The virus is spread through the movement of insects from tree to tree and there is no effective treatment or cure for the virus other than the destruction of the infected trees. The first outbreak of PRSV in Thailand was in 1975, and by 2003 the disease had spread throughout the country. Approximately 80 percent of planted areas have been infected, and yields have declined fifty percent.

¶10. During the week of July 16, FAS/Bangkok, in cooperation with the State Department and the Biotechnology Alliance Association, conducted a series of seminars titled, "Crisis and Solution: The Problem of Papaya Ring Spot Virus in Papaya Exporting and Productions" in Khon Kaen, Nakhonpathom, and Bangkok. The seminars increased awareness and support for biotechnology among Thai stakeholders by discussing global commercialization of biotech crops and Thailand's problems with the papaya ring spot virus. More than 200 participants attended the three seminars, including private and commercial papaya producers, media reporters, consumers, papaya processors, and academics.

¶11. As part of the seminars, FAS/Bangkok invited a Hawaiian biotech papaya producer, Ken Kamiya, to speak to Thai producers pragmatically about the experience of biotech papaya in Hawaii and the risks of not adopting biotech, or "rainbow," papaya when faced with PRSV. According to Kamiya, in 1998 PRSV nearly destroyed the Hawaiian papaya industry. The introduction of biotech papaya to Hawaii allowed growers to eliminate PRSV from their fields. Currently, about 95 percent of papaya production in Hawaii is crossed with biotech papaya.

Comment

¶12. Despite progress towards commercialization of biotech products

in Thailand, biotech crops lack broad support and most of the public remains unaware of the benefits that biotech crops could have for Thai farmers. Traditionally, Greenpeace and other environmental NGOs have organized awareness activities and publicity stunts to sway public opinion against allowing biotech research and development. During the most recent public diplomacy activity by BIOTEC, BAA, FAS and Embassy Bangkok, opposition groups were not present. The unexpectedly light public opposition to date could ease the way for Cabinet approval. End Comment.
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